



PROJECT MUSE®

Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age
, and: *Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A Look Back at the*
1980 Kwangju Uprising , and: *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18*
Uprising in Korea's Past and Present (review)

Hong Kal

Journal of Korean Studies, Volume 9, Number 1, Fall 2004, pp. 192-197
(Review)

Published by Duke University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2004.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/416266/summary>

presented as anything but a tactical game. It resulted in rolling heads rather than a working coalition of national left and national center.

Another problem is the book's broad coverage, a problem that most works in the country studies tradition share: trying to discuss too many areas—politics, theater, cinema, education, economics, women's rights, and so forth. Doing so, of course, limits the author to shallow waters. Many areas are touched, but none is treated in depth, and the author fails to employ any theoretical framework developed in such areas as film studies, literature, or economics. By default, such holistic studies tend to be bloodless and hard to read, and while Armstrong succeeds in bringing to life a village boy who is struggling with Korean orthography ("I wood lik to get a lot of ejjucashun nex tim" p. 104), the political and cultural figures discussed remain merely names mentioned in passing. Armstrong does display some nuance in his narration of the political process, but regrettably, the movers and shakers within it do not come alive. The author offers a mixed bag of often-contradictory explanations that never really build a sustainable argument. His frequent redundancy does not make up for his many inconsistencies of logic. In sum, *The North Korean Revolution* fails to convince.

FRANK HOFFMANN
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age
by Jae-eui Lee. Trans. by Kap Su Seol and Nick Mamatas. Los
Angeles: UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 1999. 172 pp.
\$14.95 (paper)

*Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A Look Back at the 1980
Kwangju Uprising* by Linda S. Lewis. Honolulu: University of
Hawai'i Press, 2002. xxi, 189 pp. \$21.00 (paper)

*Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past
and Present* edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Kyung Moon Hwang.
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003. xxxi, 159 pp. \$22.95
(paper)

The Kwangju uprising of May 18, 1980, is perhaps the most suppressed yet simultaneously well-known and politicized event in contemporary Korean history. Following the shift from military to civilian government in the 1990s, a distinctive genre of documentaries, literature, poems, drama, movies, and memorials have formed around "Kwangju," evoking and reshaping public memories of the event itself. This "commemoration boom" has opened up a

space not only for (an) exposing and deepening of “truths” behind the event but also fuels the public debate over the meaning of the Kwangju civilian uprising in Korean history. To cope with the resurgence of memories around the event, the state, in 1993, issued an official apology for the massacre and sought to appropriate the Kwangju uprising as a symbol of democratic and patriotic movements in Korea. Since then, the official stance on the event has shifted the social meaning of May 18 from “Kwangju Riot” or “Kwangju People’s Uprising” to the very different sobriquet of “Kwangju Democratization Movement.” Three recent volumes on Kwangju examine how the incident has been perceived, interpreted, and historicized by various groups for different objectives in the quarter century since the tragedy.

Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age (1985, 1999) was the first written account on the event in Korea. Written in 1985 under a pseudonym, it was circulated as an underground text with the “mute” title *Nōmō nōmō* [*Beyond Beyond*]. The text, however, ultimately fell into the hands of students and others and became a bestseller. I read it as a first-year college student, and this experience had a profound impact on my understanding of contemporary Korean politics. It shaped my consciousness for the first time about this event, and I was astounded and awed by the power of the state and what could happen to students who were engaged in political protest. The actual author, Jae-eui Lee, wrote the book from two positions: as an “objective” witness in order to “bring the Kwangju uprising to light,” (p. 13) and as a participant to show that “we, the insurgents struggled to end the isolation by spreading the word of the uprising to the rest of world.” (p. 11) For Lee, the main struggle was to reveal the state’s cover-up and distorted accounts of the truth, as well as to finish the incomplete narrative of the event. In order for people to “ . . . know our truth, if we were all killed,” (p. 11) Lee interviewed other witnesses, collected their experiences, and recorded what happened in Kwangju in May 1980, stating that “we recorded the facts we could confirm.” (p. 13) As Bruce Cumings remarked in his introduction to the English version, Lee’s book is considered as “the most accurate account” of the incident. (p. 17) At the time of my first reading it, I was convinced that the book spoke the “truth” of the event. Yet, this simple “truth” has evolved along with the active process of remembering Kwangju over the last twenty-five years. It is clear from the outpouring of material on Kwangju that the “truth” is bent and altered by the multitude of voices that are part of the active movements for remembering the event.

The Kwangju memory has become more as well as less. Continuously revisited by various institutions, the narratives of May 18 have evolved. Linda Lewis, an anthropologist who witnessed the event and its aftermath, has recently reflected on the event in her *Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A*

Look Back at the 1980 Kwangju Uprising. Like *Kwangju Diary*, the strength of Lewis's book lies in her position as an eyewitness to the event. Lewis compiled testimonies of the event, providing a compelling record of "what happened." The first half of the book is based on her field notes taken in 1980. Her narrative coincides with her subject position of being there, which she expressed in terms such as: "I went," "I watched," and "I heard." The book is unique not only due to the author's particular position as a Western anthropologist engaged in witnessing the event, but also, more importantly, to the ways in which Lewis situates the event in the broader context of the changing politics of commemorating the Kwangju Uprising over the ensuing twenty years—politics that have also changed the truth of the event she witnessed.

In the second half of the book, Lewis attends to the ways in which the Uprising was rewritten into the newly constructed democratization narrative of the nation-state. By the end of the 1990s, Lewis argues, May 18 had been successfully appropriated by, and integrated into, the life of the nation-state. "Its legacy is evoked not just in the counter-hegemonic discourse of the waning Minjung movement, but now by the state as well in the interest of the nation." (p. 103) The state's appropriation of the civilian uprising against violence was most clearly expressed in the establishment of a national commemoration day on May 18 and the (re)construction of a number of sites connected to the event as places for national memorials. In particular, Lewis provides a critical account of the re-interment of the May 18 dead in the new ritual space of the government-supported cemetery (1997). The new national cemetery displaced the site of interment for the initial victims, the Mangwŏl-dong Cemetery, which had been the locus of anti-government resistance since 1980. The new cemetery serves various functions. It contributes to the erasure of the old cemetery's memory and effaces the social (especially class) identities of the May 18 victims. By moving the victims to the new cemetery, the state removed them as a focal point for the particular local struggles connected to the old Mangwŏl-dong Cemetery. Thus the state domesticates and diffuses the legacy of the civilian antigovernment uprising by appropriating the victims and channeling their memory into a broader national commemoration of democracy and patriotism writ large.

Lewis argues that by making everyone a hero in the rhetoric of broader, universal goals such as democracy and human rights, the state has finally cut loose the meaning of the uprising from its historical contingencies. Her book pays particular attention to the complex power relations and splits within the city in the 1980s that, according to Lewis, have been suppressed in the official account. Lewis details instances of confrontations, especially between the authorities and civilians, thus revealing the multiple social conflicts connected to the events of May 18. For Lewis, by commemorating the Kwangju upris-

ing as a model of “democratic society” and “civil solidarity,” the state has attempted to suppress the complexity of social struggles that incited the uprising and also to obliterate the spirit of civilian resistance against state violence. The commemoration of Kwangju suggests that shared aspiration for democracy can only be realized by the state, but, as Lewis points out, at the cost of forgetting the violence of the state itself. In this sense, the price of the restoring of Kwangju’s honor is “the erasure from public memory of the long struggle to realize that goal and the continued suffering of many of its victims.” (p. 153) By retrieving her own eyewitness account of May 18 and juxtaposing it with the state’s appropriation of the event, Lewis challenges the state’s current attempt to finesse its own violent behavior by resignifying Kwangju. The challenge is posed by asking the fundamental question of who should lay claim to the memory of May 18.

If Lewis provides an account on how May 18 has been abstracted by the nation-state, *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea’s Past and Present*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Kyung Moon Hwang, seeks to offer comprehensive reassessment of the historical event by combining essays written from diverse perspectives and methodologies. Situating the event in the sequence of “contentious” politics in Korea, the volume reveals multiple perceptions, shifting legacies, and surprising effects of the Kwangju uprising for various groups of people. The first two essays, by Jong-chul Ahn and Jung-woon Choi, demonstrate the solidarity of Kwangju citizens in their struggle against the martial law troops sent by the government. Ahn and Choi show respectively the ways in which the “citizen army” and the “absolute community” formed by the people in Kwangju “autonomously overcame their fears, risked their lives in struggle, and came together freely to reaffirm and celebrate their humanity, their true citizenship.” (p. 6) Jung-Kwan Cho argues that the legacy of the heroic act of the Kwangju citizens contributed substantially to the weakening of the power of the military government. The legacy of Kwangju heroism inhibited the military from using force during a critical juncture in June 1987. These essays portray the Kwangju citizens as not mere victims of state violence but as active actors in realizing the democratization of Korea. Jean Underwood, an American missionary in Korea, shares this position and recollects the uprising as a heroic yet unknown act, in her words: “Korea’s Tiananmen Square incident.” (p. 23)

If the first part of the collection shows the integrity and the inspirational acts of Kwangju’s citizenry, the essay by Linda S. Lewis and Ju-na Byun, “From Heroic Victims to Disabled Survivors,” takes a cautious look at the making of Kwangju victims as national heroes. They argue that valorizing the Kwangju uprising in terms of patriotic heroism in the 1990s has, ironically, made the victims’ voices harder to hear. These authors indicate that the

“disabled survivors” were revictimized when they were situated in the broadly inclusive categories of injustice in Korean political history or human rights abuse. Grand narratives often detach stories from the specific real life contentious issues such as compensation, delineating different kinds of victims, responsibility for the massacre, and so forth. Lewis and Byun reflect on the position taken by some victims who “would prefer to live longer as disabled survivors, rather than hasten their posthumous glorification as heroic victims.” (pp. 62–63)

The last two essays show the ways in which the Kwangju event has been expressed in cultural articulations, one for popular consumption and the other for the reconstruction of an image of the region. Don Baker’s essay analyzes how the event has been reconstructed as a usable past, if not a consumable present. Baker pays particular attention to representations of the uprising in popular genres of literature, music, drama, and movies that not only evoke painful memories of May 18 but also produce “competing myths” of the seminal event. (p. 104) Reflecting on the making of the Kwangju victims into patriotic heroes, Baker warns that “an ideological interpretation risks turning Kwangju into a more politically aware community than it actually was in May 1980.” (p. 105) Cultural representations offer particular ways of addressing the events that resist, but are nonetheless not immune to ideological interpretation. Sallie Yea connects the transformation of “Kwangju” narratives with the cultural politics of the south Cholla region. Yea pays particular attention to Kwangju city’s effort to get rid of the image of radicalism and marginality associated with the region and to create its new image as democratic, cultural, and global. Yea shows how the appeal of democracy, civil society, and culture to global audience is well expressed in the “memorial industry” of Kwangju, which includes monuments, memorial sites, cemeteries, and the international art festival, the Kwangju Biennale.

This collection of essays written by scholars in both Korea and the United States does not necessarily attempt to present a collective view of the event. Rather, it offers diverse and even conflicting perspectives across the past and the present of May 18. This is one reason why Keun-sik Jung finds it complicated to answer the question, “Has Kwangju been realized?” What this volume, as well Lewis’s book suggests is that the event can be approached in many different ways. The “Kwangju” event continuously reproduces itself in the intertwined (not binary) concepts of origin and representation, truth and interpretation, solidarity and conflict, and hero and victim.

The authors of these three books give us a strong sense of the importance of resisting any attempt to complete the legacy of Kwangju. They open up for reflection new questions on issues focused around national identity and state formation. How do we make sense of state terrorism against the state’s own

citizens, in a polity that has been promoting a sense of “national community” based on Korean ethnic unity? How can victims’ varied efforts to overcome such traumatic experiences be acknowledged and understood when the state abstracts (redirects) their experience in new grand narratives? The “contentious” issues invested in the Kwangju event have spilled over into the polarized politics in Korea. Today, it is still possible to hear the echoes of the Kwangju Uprising in the nation’s turbulent politics—its left-right ideological split, anti-communism, dictatorship and resistance, regional imbalances, and presence of foreign forces—as well as in more personal memories expressed in the pages of a diary.

HONG KAL

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Han'guk hyôndaek minjok undong yôn'gu—haebang hu minjok kukka kônsôl undong kwa t'ongil chônsôn [The Modern Korean Nationalist Movement: The Movement to Establish a Nation-state in the Post-Liberation Period and the United Front] by Sô Chung-sôk. Seoul: Yôksa pip'yôngsa, 1991. 678 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Won 14,000

In recent years several scholars, including Kathryn Weathersby (*Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945–1950: New Evidence from Russian Archives*, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993) and Pak Myông-nim (*Han'guk chônjaeng ûi palbal kwa kiwôn* [Outbreak and Origins of the Korean War], Seoul: Nanam Ch'ulpan, 1996), have put forth illuminating new accounts of the critical five-year period in modern Korean history between liberation in August 1945 and the outbreak of war in June 1950. They have clarified and, to a significant degree, contradicted the findings that stimulated a generation of scholarly attention to this topic: Bruce Cumings' *The Origins of the Korean War I: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947* (Princeton, 1981). In some ways, Sô Chung-sôk's *Han'guk hyôndaek minjok undong yôn'gu—haebang hu minjok kukka kônsôl undong kwa t'ongil chônsôn* (The Modern Korean Nationalist Movement: The Movement to Establish a Nation-state in the Post-Liberation Period and the United Front) can pass as the first systematic response to Cumings by a Korean scholar. Like Cumings, Sô seeks to probe the workings of political and social forces in the first three years of post-liberation Korea in order to account for national division in 1948, which set the stage for civil war in 1950. (Sô has recently provided a much shorter second volume covering the 1948–50 period.) And like Cumings, Sô Chung-sôk attaches great importance to the fissures in the political